

ASIA CHIC

The Influence of Chinese and Japanese Textiles on the Fashions of the Roaring Twenties

10 April - 7 July 2019



PRESS RELEASE

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1. The Influence of Chinese and Japanese Textiles on the Fashions of the Roaring Twenties

During the early decades of the 20th century, the materials, forms, motifs and colour combinations of Asian clothing had a profound influence on European fashion. The discovery of the kimono in particular, with its loose cut and flowing lines, and the diversity of its patterns, fascinated the great couturiers. It made it possible to liberate women from the wearing of a corset and social constraints, while also offering them a new and daring elegance with exotic tones.

In France, around the 1920s, a great number of magazines written for and about women were founded. The *Gazette du bon ton, art, modes et frivolités* was one of the best to reflect the period, but there were also *Modes et manières d'aujourd'hui*, *Costumes parisiens*, *Journal des dames et des modes*, the French version of *Vogue* and *Les Modes*, for example. They offered advice on different topics, such as home decoration, lifestyles, the theatre, fashionable holiday resorts, and of course fashion, all abundantly illustrated with colour plates. These were generally created from a drawing whose outlines were first engraved, then printed with black ink. The areas within the outlines were then filled in with watercolours or gouaches, applied using a stencil. The composition of the images, the different stages of their production, and the themes developed all strongly resemble the Japanese woodblock prints by which they were inspired.

The Baur Foundation in Geneva has a sufficiently ample and representative collection of Asian textiles to provide a comparison with the Western fashions of this period. The remarkable encounter of the two has given rise to an exhibition and catalogue in which designs by Parisian creators are displayed alongside pieces of contemporary Far Eastern textiles. The accompanying book makes it possible also to publish the donations of Japanese kimonos and other clothes received by the Baur Foundation – including the Sato Mariko (2008) and Sugawara Keiko (2015) donations – but also certain Chinese textiles that add to the richness of the institution's collections.

2. Asia and the Roaring Twenties

In the late 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century two important art movements developed that owed much to the wave of influences arriving from Asia. Art Nouveau, and later Art Deco, were both an upshot of a society undergoing profound change. The former, which came into being at the turn of the 20th century, faded soon after, swept away by the tumult of World War I. The second appeared during the 1920s, rather like a reminiscence of Art Nouveau. Very quickly, however, Art Deco began to explore new ideas and developed until, in turn, World War II brought an end to its existence. The period focused on, called the Roaring Twenties, lay between the two wars and opens a window on a world experiencing rapid change.

Asia was present in both in different forms, and particularly in the dress of a new class of women gaining in independence. Oriental costumes, tunics, pleated skirts, Chinese hats, kimonos, Japanese belts, and various effects created by dyeing, embroidery and different weaves stimulated the imagination of designers searching for styles of dress better suited to this new existence. Women became emancipated, and their forms of dress had to correspond to this lifestyle. To satisfy this need, creators drew inspiration from many sources. In 1923 one critic commented, “We find ourselves in the midst of the *Thousand and One Nights*, as it is the East and China that have inspired and promote many of the most sensational styles”.

3. Chinese Costumes, Silk Woven with Gold and Dragons

The discovery of silk thread and the many possible ways it could be treated and woven lie at the heart of Chinese culture. Long a mysterious material, this precious thread stimulated the desire and interest of consumers. The ruling class naturally took control of its production and adorned themselves with it as silk became an attribute inseparable from power. Silk therefore became an integral part of Chinese dress.

During the Qing dynasty, traditional dress was generally a flared tunic with long sleeves. Women also wore trousers or a pleated skirt with a jacket. However, the most striking characteristic was their decorative motifs and the significance of these. In China, designs are endowed with apotropaic powers. Hence, the Son of Heaven and the mandarins who represented him had to wear stately and protective images. The decorative language depicted on official costumes followed precise rules that were indicative of both the wearer's function and rank. Women's clothing was less strictly regulated. They could wear the hierarchical emblems of their husbands at formal ceremonies, while dressing in a less rigorous manner in private. They tended to prefer auspicious motifs to protect their household. These traditions and China's sumptuary laws were not however always understood in Europe, and what was retained of Chinese costumes there was the richness of the materials and their decoration, the brightness of the colours and the variety of their decorative patterns.

It was precisely these compositions, filled with real and imaginary creatures, scattered with flowers, birds, butterflies and insects in a magical natural setting, that excited the imagination of Western creators. Silk, with its dazzling colours, softness and embroideries featuring dragons and phoenixes, and their motifs sewn with gold thread, prompted an outpouring of interpretations in haute-couture designs during the 1920s.

4. The Kimono, a Garment Designed as a Jewel

The traditional Japanese item of clothing was worn by men and women of all social standing. It is a sort of loose, straight-cut coat held at the waist by a knotted belt. Its manufacture was economical in terms of material as the different elements of the pattern are designed to fit into a single bolt width with no offcuts. Once made, a kimono folds easily along its main seams. The apparent simplicity of this belies a complex tradition that governs its usage. The length of the sleeves, the colours, motifs, lining, *mon* family crests and the material from which it is made, all reflect the status of its wearer. In the past, when a young girl from a good family married, a complete set of kimonos and belts to be worn at all the different stages of her life would be prepared in advance by her relatives. This set, which had to reflect her personal standing, would be presented in front of everyone before the ceremony. This symbolic trousseau was complemented by family belongings, thus handing down to the bride part of her personal history, which she would in turn pass on.

In Japan, the magnificence of the garment or the knot with which the *obi* is tied have the function of finery as Japanese women do not wear jewels, with the exception of a few combs inserted in their hair or a precious object such as a belt ornament, a fan, or a case slipped in the opening of her robe. Consequently, craftsmen competed with one another in inventiveness in the decoration on bolts of silk, which were designed as though they were pieces of jewellery. These specificities did not escape the knowledgeable gaze of Parisian couturiers, who were greatly inspired by them. Like Chinese clothes, kimonos offered them an unexpected source of technical and aesthetic innovation, something they ardently sought.

5. USEFUL INFORMATION

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The Influence of the Chinese and Japanese Textiles on the Fashions of the Roaring Twenties

Dates	10 April – 7 July 2017
Address	Fondation Baur, Musée des Arts d'Extrême-Orient 8 rue Munier-Romilly 1206 Geneva – Switzerland Tel.: +41 22 704 32 82 Website: www.fondation-baur.ch Email: musee@fondationbaur.ch
Opening times	Open from Tuesday to Sunday from 2pm to 6pm (closed Monday), until 8pm when guided visits are held (see below)
Tickets	Full: CHF 15.- Unemployed, handicapped and students: CHF 10.-
Organizer	Estelle Niklès van Osselt, Curator
Design	Nicole Gérard
Press contact	Baur Foundation, Museum of Far Eastern Arts Audrey Jouany Deroire Tel: +41 22 704 32 82 Email: musee@fondationbaur.ch
Catalogue	<i>Asia Chic, The Influence of Chinese and Japanese Textiles on the Fashions of the Roaring Twenties</i> , by Estelle Niklès van Osselt, Baur Foundation, Cinq Continents, Geneva, Milan, 2019. (Published in French and in English)
Cultural mediation	Anne-Sophie Kreis, mediation@fondationbaur.ch
Public guided visits:	Wednesdays, 6.30pm: 17 April, 8 and 22 May 5 and 19 June 3 July 2019
Private guided visits:	Reservation required, please contact musee@fondationbaur.ch